

COMMENT ON THE PROPOSED SUPPRESSION OF *STRIX CAPENSIS*

DAUDIN Z.N.(S.) 1692

(see volume 24, pages 34-35, 203-204)

By G. F. Mees (Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie, Leiden, Netherlands)

Though I am not really opposed to Clancey's proposal, the problem is more complicated than as presented by him, and for this reason I would consider it advisable to postpone a decision until the case has been thoroughly investigated.

Some comment is necessary regarding the replacement name if *Strix capensis* Smith is rejected as preoccupied. Roberts (1936), and Clancey (1967) accepted *Strix punctata* Lichtenstein (1854) as the next available name, but this name is a nomen nudum without nomenclatural significance. Probably this is the reason for Vincent's statement, quoted by Clancey, that: "*T. punctata* (Lichtenstein) does not replace *T. capensis*"; this statement is otherwise difficult to understand. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the name *Strix punctata* was validated by Gray (1869), whose citation shows that he used it as a substitute name for *Strix capensis* Smith. Though he does not expressly say so, it is evident that the substitution was made because Gray knew *Strix capensis* to be preoccupied. If *Strix capensis* Smith is rejected, the African Grass-Owl will therefore have to be called *Tyto punctata* (G. R. Gray, 1869). An advantage is that, as this name is solely based on plate 45 of Smith (1849), the type-locality of the species as accepted at present, remains the same.

Clancey's proposal makes sense from the purely African point of view, but it is impossible to judge it correctly without considering the Asiatic-Australian *Tyto longimembris* (Jerdon, 1839). In recent years there is a growing opinion that this bird is conspecific with *T. capensis* (Smith, 1834), an opinion to which I also incline. Whereas in Africa the species is not known to show geographical variation (four names: *Strix cabrae* Dubois, 1902; *Tyto capensis damarensis* Roberts, 1922; *T. c. libratus* Peters & Loveridge, 1935, and *T. c. cameroonensis* Serle, 1949, each based on a single individual only, are usually regarded as synonyms, cf. White, 1965), *T. longimembris* has, according to the latest revisers (Amadon 1959, Mees 1964) at least five races (if Australian *walleri* Diggles, 1866, is recognized, and *baliem* Ripley, 1964, based on one specimen compared with one skin of *papuensis*, is accepted, there are seven). With a range from India, China, and Formosa, to Victoria, New Caledonia and Fiji, *T. longimembris* is also the more widely distributed of the two. When therefore we do not restrict ourselves to Africa, but survey the species as a whole, acceptance of *punctata* as the valid name for the African subspecies will mean a change of a single name only, whereas conservation of *capensis* will result in a change of name of a widely distributed polytypic species. Though to nomenclatural discussion it is irrelevant whether a name is appropriate or not, the name *longimembris* describes excellently the most striking feature of the species, whereas combinations such as *Tyto capensis amauronota* and *Tyto capensis papuensis* for birds from the Philippines and New Guinea, though accepted by Amadon & Jewett (1946), Amadon (1959), and Ripley (1964), are less satisfactory. The specific name *Tyto longimembris* has been in general use since 1912. Rejection of *T. capensis* relieved me of the necessity of making changes in the established nomenclature of the Indo-Australian forms with which I was at the time concerned, and therefore was an obvious and logical course to take (Mees, 1964).

There is a second argument in favour of suppressing the name *T. capensis* (Smith). It is that Smith (1834) has described, besides this species, four other owls under the specific name of *capensis*, so that we get:

binomen as published:

Strix Capensis Smith*Bubo Capensis* Smith*Noctua Capensis* Smith*Otus Capensis* Smith*Scops Capensis* Smith

present allocation:

Tyto capensis (Smith)*Bubo capensis* Smith*Glaucidium capense* (Smith)*Asio capensis* (Smith)*Otus capensis* (Smith)

It will be seen that the name *capensis* Smith occurs in the Striges in no less than eight genera, seven of which are currently recognized. I find this confusing and believe that we could well do with one or two less.

If *Tyto capensis* (Smith) was the only name affected by Daudin's name, I would, on the basis of the arguments just given, favour a shift to *Tyto longimembris punctata* (G. R. Gray) for the African Grass-Owl. There is, however, another pertinent side to the problem not brought forward by Clancey: *Strix bubo capensis* Daudin is without the slightest doubt a *Bubo*, and therefore the name preoccupies not only in the genus *Strix*, but also in the genus *Bubo*, invalidating *Bubo capensis* Smith.

Presently I shall discuss the identity of *Strix bubo capensis* Daudin, but first attention must be drawn to further confusion caused by Smith when he christened five owls *capensis*. Sclater (1921) was the first to observe that *Otus capensis* (Smith) is a secondary homonym of *Otus capensis* Smith. At the time, both names were in use, one as *Asio capensis* (Smith), the other as *Otus capensis* (Smith), and Sclater, as first reviser and backed by page priority, decided to retain *Otus capensis* (Smith), and to synonymise *Asio capensis* (Smith). As the name for the polytypic species previously known as *Asio capensis*, he introduced *A. tingitanus* (Loche, 1867) (after the North-African race), and in the assumption that the South-African subspecies remained without a valid name, he proposed *Asio tingitanus andrewsmithi* to replace *Otus capensis* Smith. A few months later Stresemann (1922) pointed out the existence of an older name for the South-African subspecies: *Strix (Brachyotus) helvola* Lichtenstein, 1842. This second change was accepted by Sclater (1924).

In the meantime Hartert (1923) had argued the resurrection of *Asio capensis* (Smith):

"Zur Nomenklatur von *Asio capensis* haben sich W. Sclater, Stresemann und Rothschild geäußert. Die ersten beiden Autoren verwerfen den Namen *capensis* für unsere *Asio*, weil Smiths *Scops capensis* in der heutigen Kombination *Otus capensis* heisst. Dies aber ist unlogisch. "*Otus Capensis*" Smith, die Ohreule, war ein bei seinem Erscheinen nicht vorweggenommener Name, der Name *capensis* muss daher für die kurzohrige Kapelle weiter angenommen werden und *Strix (Brachyotus) helvola* Licht. und "*Asio tingitanus andrewsmithi*" Sclater 1922 sind Synonyme von *Asio capensis capensis*. Dahingegen kann die südafrikanische Zwergohreule natürlich nicht *Otus capensis* genannt werden, da dieser Name 1834 vergeben wurde, sondern muss *Otus senegalensis latipennis* (Kaup, 1862) genannt werden. Vgl. Vög. pal. Fauna, p. 982."

Hartert therefore reversed Sclater's decision, accepted *Asio capensis* (Smith), and suppressed *Scops capensis* Smith in favour of the next oldest synonym, *Otus senegalensis latipennis* (Kaup). Hartert's authority was such that he has been universally followed, even by Sclater (1930) himself. Though Hartert certainly had an amount of logic on his side, I can find nothing in the Code (Stoll & al., 1961, art. 24) that would legalise this reversal of the decision taken by Sclater, who was the first reviser.

Mrs. Margaret Doyle has drawn my attention to the fact that as far as the secondary homonymy of *Otus capensis* Smith and *Scops capensis* Smith is concerned, neither name should ever have been changed, since the two species were not, and are not, considered congeneric (see Art. 59b—"... by any zoologist who believes that the two species-group taxa in question are congeneric").

We return now to *Strix bubo capensis* Daudin. The reason this name has been largely ignored was originally, as Clancey (1967) mentioned, because it was described as a variety and not as a species. Later Sundevall (1868), in his discussion of Levaillant's work, expressed the opinion that Levaillant's plate 40 does not depict an African owl at all, but is *Bubo bengalensis* (*Bubo buba bengalensis* in modern nomenclature). Subsequently Sharpe (1875) remarked that the question was too obscure to admit of substituting *Strix bubo capensis* for the well-established name *bengalensis*, and this has been, as far as I could ascertain, the last word on the question.

Levaillant was notoriously unreliable, and the inference is that he might never have seen a *Bubo* in South Africa, and has put in a figure of *Bubo buba bengalensis* to make his book more interesting. In this particular case I think that we do Levaillant an



*La tête et le pied du Grand Duc
de Grande Oiseau.
Les deux se trouvent dans le même
en Afrique.*